

## Idaho Senator Larry Craig:

# VETERANS UPDATE

Summer, 2005



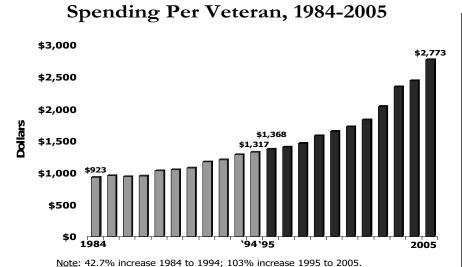
In January, I became the chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and I enjoy the challenges and opportunities my new position provides. We are working hard to ensure veterans receive the best, most efficient and effective care possible, and it is my hope that this newsletter provides you with the information you need. If my staff and I can help you, please let me know.

Larry E. Craig, U.S. Senator

### **Veterans Funding and Benefits**

I recently sponsored an amendment, adopted by the Senate, to increase money available for veterans benefits and services by \$450 million above the nearly \$71 billion President Bush proposed for 2006. Three months later, however, my committee staff discovered that the VA was running a major budget deficit in its current 2005 budget. The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee then held an emergency hearing at which I called for the VA to upgrade its budget model, so we do not face a similar shortfall in the future. I also informed VA officials that the committee will now review VA's budget on a quarterly basis. Frustrated but determined to do right by our nation's veterans, I then successfully led the charge to meet the VA's needs by adding an additional \$1.5 billion to the 2005 budget. With these efforts, we will:

- <u>Maintain</u> an affordable prescription drug program for veterans.
- **Protect** in-state veterans nursing homes from proposed cuts.
- Adopt the President's request to spend an additional \$100 million for mental health services.
- **Fund** the President's request to spend an additional \$100 million for prosthetics.
- <u>Meet</u> the President's requests to increase the staff who handle disability claims, continue to increase the number of cemeteries for veterans, and add \$116 million in increased funding for construction.



Source: Department of Veterans Affairs

## Veterans Continue to be a Priority for Congress

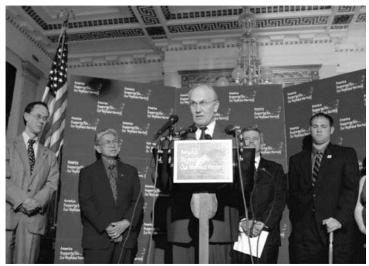
Last year the VA spent more than \$300 million in Idaho while serving the 136,500 veterans who live in our great state.

In addition last year, more than 2,000 veterans, reservists or survivors in Idaho used the GI Bill for their education, and over 15,000 Idahoans owned homes with active VA home loan guarantees.

#### **Wounded Warrior Legislation Passes**

Those wounded in the service of their nation will benefit from new legislation I sponsored and which was passed by both the Senate and House of Representatives, and signed into law by President Bush. Now those in military service who were wounded or traumatically injured since the beginning of military operations in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, will be eligible to receive anywhere from \$25,000 and \$100,000. The money is intended to offset the costs families experience when they leave jobs and homes to be with their loved ones as they recuperate.

I became an advocate for the traumatic injury legislation after meeting three young men – all in their 20's – who are veterans of the war in Iraq. Those young men – one blind, the other missing a leg, and the third a double amputee – asked that the legislation



Introducing the Wounded Warrior bill with the support of Assistant Secretary of Defense Dr. David Wu, Sen. Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii), Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson, and several young veterans who recently returned from Iraq

benefit only those who would be injured in the future and not themselves. I was deeply impressed with their request and that is the way my legislation was crafted. But an amendment I agreed to was adopted by Congress that made the benefit retroactive. I think that was the right thing to do.

### VA Regional Office in Boise One Step Closer

Late last year Congressman Mike Simpson and I were successful in getting legislation passed that allowed the VA to obtain more land for a new Veterans Benefits Administration Regional Office in Boise. The land has recently been obtained by the VA and planning is now underway to co-locate the VA Medical Center and the VA Regional Office in a new facility. This effort will enable veterans to obtain all of their health services and benefits at one location.



Tiffany Petty testified, along with members of the Gold Star Wives organization, about the need for better information after tragedy strikes

### "One Stop Information" for War Widows and Widowers

In February, Tiffany Petty, a 25-year-old mother of two from Inkom, Idaho, testified before the Veterans' Affairs Committee about the struggles and confusion she faced after her husband was killed in Iraq. After listening to Tiffany's compelling testimony, I asked all branches of the service to work with the VA on a "One-Stop Information" benefits brochure and website to make life easier for military families after they lose a service member.

Congress is now proceeding with legislation to require the Secretary of Defense to provide such information by March 1, 2006. An amendment I authored further strengthens the legislation to make access to benefits as easy as possible.

### Visiting Idaho's Troops in Iraq

Early in May, I led a Congressional Delegation visit to Iraq with Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson, and Idaho Congressmen Mike Simpson and Butch Otter. While there we had the privilege of meeting with soldiers from the 116<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade. In Kirkuk we saw Idahoans carrying out a variety of missions to provide stability and train Iraqis. Our Idaho soldiers earned the praises of their superiors – and most important – the praise of the local Iraqi people.

### Meeting with Iraq's Prime Minister

In Baghdad we became the first members of Congress to meet with the new Iraqi Prime Minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari. We expressed to him the importance of quickly,



Chatting with soldiers from Idaho in Iraq with VA Secretary Jim Nicholson

but responsibly, putting a stable security force and functioning government in place to meet the needs of Iraqis and deal the terrorists yet another defeat.

While in theater, we also had the opportunity to see the Combat Support Hospital and the immediate, top-level medical treatment our troops receive. Because of that quick, high quality care, 90 percent of American soldiers wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan survive – a dramatic improvement from World War II when 30 percent died from their wounds.



Greeting Idahoans stationed in Germany with Congressmen Simpson and Otter, and Secretary Nicholson

### U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is now 75 years old

The VA was created July 21, 1930, and now employs 237,000 people. It operates 157 hospitals, 860 clinics and will treat 5.2 million people this year. Its actions are overseen by the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

### **Meeting with the Troops in Germany**

After Iraq, Secretary Nicholson and I, along with Congressmen Otter and Simpson, traveled to Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany and met with wounded warriors and staff at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. We were there to examine the transition from the battlefield, and I was impressed with the medical skill and expertise available to our service men and women.

We were told that as we met in the morning, those who would be treated there that night had not yet been wounded in Iraq. Such rapid, high quality treatment is saving countless lives,

but those seriously wounded today require us to redouble our efforts to see that they, and other veterans, receive the highest quality care we can provide.

### **Protecting Veterans in Bankruptcy**

Few things in life are more difficult and heartbreaking than going through bankruptcy. But while

### **How to Contact Senator Craig**

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some need it, others abuse it, and this year Congress made going into bankruptcy tougher for those who can afford to pay. In the process, Congress adopted a measure to help low-

income veterans,



New Website for Veterans

The U.S. Senate Committee on
Veterans' Affairs has launched a
new website where you can watch
hearings, track legislation, review
issues, sign up for e-news, link to the
Veterans History Project of the

Library of Congress, and more.
Check it out online at:

http://veterans.senate.gov

active-duty military, and people who have serious medical conditions. The legislation helps protect disabled veterans if their debt occurred primarily when they were on active duty or performing a defense activity.

### Brain Cancer in 1991 Gulf War Veterans Draws Concern

A recent study reviewed the health of U.S. troops who may have been exposed to nerve agents in the 1991 Gulf War. Researchers looked at 60 diseases and found only brain cancer rates were statistically significant - 12 more deaths than expected. As a result, I have asked VA to consider brain cancer as a "presumptive illness" in those who may have been exposed.